Social Network Analysis on Sensitive Issues: A Human Subjects Research Case Study
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Problem Statement: Social network analysis is increasingly used to study sensitive topics, which presents a number of ethical issues. Researchers aiming to use this method to study the context of recovery from sexual assault raised a number of ethical issues in consultation with their campus IRB. To conduct this research in a way that maximizes adherence to ethical principles, as well as data quality, the researchers and the IRB discussed ethical issues in three areas: 1) the protection of identifiable data and the privacy of participants; 2) recruitment and coercion procedures; and 3) issues of consent.

Description of the Research: Privacy of social network data is a particularly salient issue given the sensitivity of data about sexual assault. In social network surveys, names are linked to responses, but when data are analyzed, ID numbers can be used rather than names. The researchers and the IRB explored ways to ensure the privacy of participants and protecting their data before analysis, including using online survey options that would immediately unlink data from names, deleting the identity key after de-identification, or creating customized surveys for each participant so that participants do not need to identify themselves. A second central challenge relates to designing recruitment procedures that minimize coercion. To conduct social network analysis effectively, researchers must attempt to collect data from and about as many of the people in the group as possible. The researchers proposed incentivizing high participation with a monetary reward to the group, but were concerned that sorority leaders would pressure members to complete the survey to obtain the reward. The IRB and the researchers together developed procedures that would minimize the involvement of sorority leadership in recruitment. Third, the IRB and researchers discussed issues of consent. Specifically, would participants need to consent to have others answer questions about them? Who should be treated as a research participant? What kinds of questions could we ask without raising secondary subjects concerns? In addressing this issue, we discussed using an opt-out procedure during survey administration, such that participants could indicate that they did not want their responses, or responses about them, to be used in network analysis.

Suggestions for Implementation: We will share the alternatives that were discussed and the ethical issues connected to them so our experiences can inform others who wish to do this type of research.